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Movie Mavens: US Newspaper Women Take on the Movies, 1914–1923, edited by Richard Abel. University of Illinois Press, 2021, 288 pp.

Gabrielle Stecher

Before Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper became Hollywood's most notorious gossip girls, there was the Louella Parsons of the *Chicago Record-Herald*. In the mid-1910s, Parsons had yet to pivot towards gossipy star profiles and had begun penning a daily film review column, covering films such as *Carmen* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1915) and *A Fool There Was* (William Fox, 1915). Today, Parsons is one of the best-remembered women writing in and about Hollywood in its early decades. As Richard Abel reveals, however, she was by no means alone.

Movie Mavens: US Newspaper Women Take on the Movies, 1914–1923 is an indispensable primer for understanding the ways in which female journalists such as Parsons, Mae Tinee and nineteen others were essential agents of cinema criticism and history. For readers potentially puzzled by the specific nine-year period the anthology covers, the answer is quite simple: 1914 was the year that the *Chicago Tribune* cemented the roles of Tinee (later Tinée) and Kitty Kelly, an important editor and reviewer respectively, who are fixtures of *Movie Mavens*. The 1923 cut-off date might feel abrupt, but it is justified when one considers the difficulty of obtaining copyright permissions for columns and reviews published after this point. As Abel points out, this can be nearly impossible, especially if the periodical has long since folded. Additionally, Abel notes that compiling an anthology of women's writing about film during this period was not without difficulty. *Movie Mavens* was a project produced during the coronavirus pandemic, making archival research all the more challenging. The volume, then, relies heavily on documentation that had already been digitised.

One of the most fascinating elements of this anthology is its emphasis on location. Film criticism and reportage, as Abel illuminates, were not solely coming out of what are usually considered the geographical hubs of early American filmmaking, the production centres of Los Angeles and New York. Instead, Abel centralises what otherwise might be understood as the periphery of the burgeoning film industry: the Midwest. Chicago quickly emerges as a central hub: "No fewer than four women besides Mae Tinée served as editors and columnists in three different Chicago newspapers, arguably making the city the initial center of newspaper film reviewing" (13). Geography thus becomes one of the organising principles of the anthology; wartime is the other.

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The volume's material is divided into four chapters that suggest how the United States' entry into the First World War impacted trends of both men's and women's participation in the newspaper industry. Chapter One, "Women Writers Lead the Way, 1914–1916", surveys women's pre-war contributions to Midwestern newspapers; as the opportunities to cover the film industry exploded, "an equal number of women and men took advantage of the initial opportunity to write film reviews and other articles" (7). Of the ten women whose work is included in this chapter, seven, including Mae Tinee, were reporters or columnists for Midwestern papers. Chapter Two, "Women Writers During the Great War, 1917–1918", includes seven women writing for papers such as the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Des Moines Tribune*, and the *Indianapolis Sunday Star*. As the United States entered the First World War, so did its men into the armed forces, thus opening up opportunities for women in the workforce. Abel, however, expresses uncertainty regarding the war's impact on newspaper staffing. It is difficult to determine just how many men and women were writing film reviews and movie pages during this period. The "First Annual Newspaper and Theater Directory" published in *Motion Picture News* in 1919 is only helpful to a limited extent, as are current digital databases, only yielding a certain number of names. While Abel speculates that women reviewers and editors could be hidden behind initials, there remains a strong showing by writers such as Kelly, Tinée, Parsons and others, such as Dorothy Day and Janet Flanner. Chapter Three, "A Peak Period for Women Writers, 1919–1921", covers the immediate postwar period. With the end of the war came an influx of (largely male) newspaper writers. While there is a strong showing by the largest number of women writers during this period, male reviewers and editors likely outnumbered their female counterparts. Finally, in Chapter Four, "Women Writers Carry On, 1922–1923", Abel clarifies that, while men dominated the movie news industry by this point, an important exception was Chicago, where four female film writers "reigned as the city's movie mavens" (196).

The female film critics highlighted in this volume spoke not just to a homogenised viewership of filmgoers. As Abel points out, many of these writers were addressing an explicitly female audience, and it was not enough to simply review the content of a film or discuss its manner of production. After all, moviegoing was a new form of leisure, and its audiences and fans could themselves become the subjects of these pieces. One of the most unique reviews—penned by Esther Hoffman for the *Day Book* in May 1915—asks readers if they have yet started a scrapbook to track the films they have watched and, consequently, the stars they have grown to love. The Movie Scrap Book, being "such a brand-new fad in movie land that some of the movie fans have not heard of it yet" was a form of tangible engagement with or response to film writing as it appeared in such periodicals (41). Hoffman directed readers on how to create their own by creating an index, clipping star photos and stories from Day Book and making a record of the films the reader has watched. The scrapbook was to become a fun form of memory keeping that was not solely for personal gratification. After all, Hoffman predicted, "it will be a very valuable record of doings in movie land" (41).

Directing readers to create a scrapbook was not the only way writers encouraged readers to engage with the world of film. In "Be Your Own Critic" for the *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, Kelly invites everyday readers to contribute their own opinions on films to the paper's "Lay Critics' Corner". It's not enough, Kelly argues, to merely reflect on what a moviegoer just watched: "we all ought to think and think out loud," she urges, "for the future of the motion picture is in the hands, not of the producer, or the exhibitor, or the professional writer, but of the public, and if the

public wants certain kinds of pictures, it is up to it to say so" (88). Readers might have been lured by the promise of making one dollar off their contribution to the paper, but what Kelly ultimately demonstrated here was the democratic nature of film criticism in its infancy. Anyone—especially women—could and should be encouraged to think critically and speak publicly about movies.

Aside from considering how audiences might engage with films and their stars through the periodical press, writers such as The Film Girl and Oma Moody Lawrence were especially concerned with the etiquette of moviegoing. The Film Girl, for instance, recommended to readers of the *Syracuse Herald* "a course of lessons on how to enter a motion picture show and sit down, and how to arise and leave without bumping against the heads of people in the row in front. With a little practice this may be done. It's done, however, alas, too seldom" (43). Another example comes to us from Oma Moody Lawrence, columnist for the *Chicago Post*. In a piece aptly titled "The Etiquette of the Picture Show", Lawrence dramatically laments "the sins of the talkative", chiding women young and old for their distracting, chatty gossip and "the sprawler" who stretches out into multiple seats in an effort to make himself at home (50). These breaches of etiquette are, for Lawrence, so egregious that she concludes that "perhaps the middle classes are the majority of devotees of the screen drama, but I have found that many otherwise well-bred and dignified persons lost all their social veneer in the darkened neighborhood theater" (50). Such discussions of etiquette illuminate another aspect of movie going as a social practice and that newspapers could determine and reinforce expectations for "proper" behaviour.

Ultimately, a complete archive of women's writing about film in periodicals of the early twentieth century is impossible. Physical copies of periodicals may no longer exist, and it is important to recognise the often unseen or overlooked labour it takes to digitise what is available. But this does not mean that more gaps cannot be filled, and part of *Movie Mavens'* value is the way it suggests threads to trace and questions that deserve answers. There is much pedagogical promise for this anthology; the pieces included here invite students and researchers alike to pose fruitful questions about topics such as censorship, how female filmgoers reacted to scenes of violence against women, women writers in wartime and how female film reviewers and editors supported the careers of long forgotten women in the film industry, including screenwriters and directors Jeanie MacPherson and Mrs. Sidney Drew, to name but a few. One of the major limitations of this volume is something Abel identifies in its earliest pages: its emphasis on "white American newspaper women writing in English during a shorter period of time for the mainstream (white) press" (2). While an exception to this is Abel's inclusion of Charlotta Bass's review of *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) for the Black weekly newspaper the *California Eagle*, there is *much* more work to be done regarding race, movie going and the periodical press. Abel himself presents a clear call to action regarding women writing about films in Black, Hispanic and foreign language periodicals. One hopes that in the not-too-distant future there will emerge an anthology that collects writing about movies outside of the mainstream, white press.

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